

February 17, 2010

*Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association regarding H.  
B. No. 5018 AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES AND REVENUES  
FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2011*

Dear Co-Chairs Harp and Geragosian, Ranking Members Miner and DeBicella, and  
Members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Eric Hammerling and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association, the first conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. CFPA has offered testimony before the Legislature on many natural resource-related issues such as sustainable forestry, state parks and forests, trail recreation, natural resource protection, and land conservation every year since 1897.

At CFPA, we appreciate that there are tremendous fiscal constraints that the Legislature is wrestling with, so in our 2010 Conservation Agenda we chose to highlight investments that will increase revenues generated for conservation, provide green jobs, and/or ultimately preserve natural resource wealth for our beautiful state. This Agenda was mailed to every member of the Legislature and is available online at [www.ctwoodlands.org/advocacy](http://www.ctwoodlands.org/advocacy).

Although we stand behind all of the recommendations in the Conservation Agenda, there are a few priorities which we'd like to highlight today:

1. ***Redressing the dissolution of the Conservation Fund in CT DEP's Budget.***  
Although we understand the pressures that led to sweeping the remaining balances from the Conservation Fund into the General Fund, we are concerned that the DEP (with the elimination of the Conservation Fund) has lost a mechanism to allow the agency to have some program stability from year to year. For example, Parks that rely on seasonal employees who may need to be hired and trained outside of normal budgetary cycles have lost both flexibility and likely timeliness in being able to hire seasonals (the bedrock of park maintenance). To help remedy this situation, we recommend that the Legislature restore some form of an off-budget account within the Department that would hold Park admission fees, and other fees that help the agency manage their fish, wildlife, and parks programs for millions of recreational users each year;

2. ***Utilizing opportunities for the CT DEP to Raise Conservation Revenues.***

The following two programs at the CT DEP no longer have the potential to raise revenue for both the Department and for the General Fund. We'd like the Legislature to incentivize these programs to raise revenues:

- a. The Maintenance & Repair/Enterprise program (notable example at Harkness Memorial State Park) has provided an opportunity for entrepreneurial park managers to generate revenues through facilities rental and other mechanisms that supported the upkeep of these facilities; and
- b. The Forestry Division has an existing opportunity to increase harvests on State Forests (according to a 2008 Yale study, sustainable harvests on State Forests could be tripled to accomplish the dual goals of locally-produced wood products and enhanced state forest health and diversity). Enabling the Forestry division to recapture a small portion of timber harvest revenues by creating a revolving fund would allow the Forestry division to contract with state certified foresters and increase revenues for the state;

3. ***Revisiting the increase in recreational and other user fees at CT DEP.***

On October 1, 2009, all of the 150+ licenses, permits, and fees administered by the CT DEP increased, with all fees under \$150 doubling. At a time that almost 10% of our working citizens are unemployed and family budgets have been cut back, this is a most unfortunate time to increase fees so precipitously. The CT DEP has documented a decrease in use at the facilities that charge fees. At the same time, usage is increasing at facilities that don't charge fees causing maintenance overload where the Department is least equipped to manage it. We encourage the Legislature to revisit the fee increases and allow the Department to phase-in or re-structure fee increases to reduce the "sticker shock" on recreational users; and

4. ***Avoid increasing management responsibilities without increasing funding.***

We are aware that there may be proposals put forward that would increase access to state parks and forests for prospective users of state parks and forests, e.g., all-terrain vehicles. Even though universal registration of ATVs has some potential for raising revenues, the additional maintenance and enforcement responsibilities that the Department would have to assume with the development and implementation of a robust program. Any expansion of programming within the Environmental Conservation side of the agency needs to be carefully examined while we are within this dire financial climate.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on these important matters, and for the critical role you play in safeguarding our state's most precious natural resources.